Good evening committee members,

Thank you all for taking the time to listen to our stories and giving us the opportunity to share them. We deeply appreciate the Assembly’s past support of the University of Connecticut, and humbly ask for its continued support as we continue to further our core values of innovation, leadership, global engagement, and diversity as one of the nation’s leading public universities.

My name is Akshayaa Kethinni Chittibabu; I am a senior undergraduate from Shrewsbury, MA pursuing an individualized major in Health, Policy & Social Medicine and minor in Sociology on the pre-medical track. As an out-of-state student coming from a math and science magnet school in Massachusetts, the decision to come to UConn was influenced by several factors: UConn’s reputation as a leader in science and technology, the university’s boundless academic and service opportunities for students from all backgrounds and fields, and generous funding through the STEM Scholarship made possible by Next Generation Connecticut. Most importantly, I look great in navy blue. Jokes aside, my decision to become a UConn Husky has been the best decision of my life, indisputably, and has shaped me into who I am today.

During my career at UConn, I have had the incredibly good fortune of being named both a Harry S. Truman Scholar and a Marshall Scholar, making me the first student in UConn’s history to win both of these awards. Out of the Boston region, where I interviewed for the Marshall, I was the only scholar from a public institution, the rest of the scholars coming from institutions like Princeton, Harvard, and MIT. This was unsurprising to me because this is the caliber of UConn, and of the students it produces. I would not be where I am today without UConn, and the opportunities, mentorship, and endless support that it has afforded me. From the minute I first stepped foot on this campus, I have not only been taken seriously as a student, but I’ve also
been challenged to be the best version of myself, as a scholar and leader. At 17, in my first semester, I walked straight into the Head of the Sociology Department’s office, impassioned by the huge problem of cervical cancer screening practice in rural South India and wanting to do something about it. Prof. Bandana Purkayastha not only heard me out, but took a chance on me: holding me to the research standard of an advanced undergraduate, guiding me through the process of Institutional Review Board approval, and helping me apply for research funding through UConn so I could eventually conduct the field work in India in the summer of 2016. She continues to be one of my most treasured mentors to this day. Experiences like this have been common for me at UConn because of how incredible our faculty are, and how willing UConn is to support student research and curiosity. Continued funding is crucial for us to continue this level of academic excellence in all major fields.

Of personal importance to me, I am the first student of color to win either of these national awards in UConn’s history. Deciding to pursue a career in public service was initially intimidating to me; after all, growing up I had never seen people who looked like me where you all are sitting. When applying to the Truman and Marshall, both awards based in American public service, I realized the importance of our leadership being as diverse as our people. It brings me great pride that UConn is committed to making this happen. While I am the first POC to win either of these awards, I certainly will not be the last. Last year, I was the only Truman finalist from UConn, this year there are three finalists, all people of color, from California, Connecticut, and New York. The diversity of excellence on campuses is outstanding, and continued funding is invaluable to seeking out this student excellence and nurturing it. Huskies are future doctors, lawyers, educators, and legislators. Huskies are scholars, Huskies are leaders, some of Connecticut’s very best. Let us continue to raise them to be.